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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000042

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [EU](#) [IS](#) [EG](#) [SY](#) [IT](#)  
SUBJECT: ITALY: FRATTINI PLANS MID-EAST MISSION, GOI  
SKEPTICAL ON EU-SYRIA LEVERAGE

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Classified By: Political MinCouns Barbara A. Leaf. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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1.(C) Italian MFA Director General for the Middle East Ragaglini painted a bleak picture of the current situation in Gaza and outlined the objectives of Foreign Minister Frattini's planned trip to the region to us January 13. Frattini will depart Rome this weekend to visit Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, accompanied by a planeload of humanitarian supplies. For Lebanon and Syria, his objective is to reinforce the need for Beirut/Hezbollah to exercise restraint and not exacerbate or take advantage of the Gaza crisis. In Cairo, Jerusalem, and Ramallah, Frattini will be looking for ways Italy and the EU can support Egyptian efforts to broker a cease-fire, and bolster the Palestinian Authority. On Gaza, the MFA believes that implementing effective control on the Philadelphi corridor, separating Gaza from Egypt, is essential to curtailing Hamas' ability to wage violence but finding an acceptable solution will be very tough. On the specific issue of Syria's pending Association Agreement with the EU, Ragaglini equivocated, suggesting approval of the agreement could be still many months off but asserting at the same time that it provides little or no leverage right now in modifying Syria's behavior. In the Italian view, Syrian leaders are solely focused on the transition in Washington and that the signs from the new administration are far more critical than any pressure EU leaders can bring to bear. End Summary.

Frattini to the region, including Damascus  
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2.(SBU) Political Minister Counselor met with MFA Director General for the Middle East Cesare Ragaglini and Levant/Egypt Office Director Carlo Formosa on January 13 for a preview of Foreign Minister Frattini's just-announced multi-nation trip to the Middle East. Ragaglini said that Frattini planned to visit Beirut and Damascus first, then fly on to Cairo, and finish up in Ramallah and Jerusalem Ramallah. The GOI is also assembling humanitarian supplies for shipment to Gaza and are trying to ensure that Frattini and the Italian relief plane arrive at the same time. But resulting logistics

delays with the relief flight have pushed the Minister's departure back from Thursday to the weekend.

13. (C) Ragaglini, who was in Israel when the Israeli operations began, painted a bleak picture of the situation. He noted that Israel was clearly intent on inflicting the greatest amount of damage against Hamas in a compressed time frame to stop the rocket launches, and -- while taking measures to limit civilian casualties -- fighting in a densely populated urban environment was exacting an increasingly heavy civilian toll. While fighting around Gaza City was a serious concern, Ragaglini was particularly focused on the difficulty in constructing a solution to the Philadelphi Corridor. He said the GOI believed that an international presence was required to close the border to arms being shipped into Gaza but Ragaglini noted that Egypt opposed any foreign troops on its territory. He commented that the GOE also faced an internal political challenge from the Bedouin in adjoining areas whose livelihoods would be heavily damaged by any serious effort at cracking down on cross border smuggling.

14. (C) Ragaglini noted that preventing the placement of a multilateral force on the Philadelphi corridor was also a critical goal for Hamas. Effective control of the border zone would limit Hamas' access to weaponry and render its strategy of armed harassment of Israel difficult to sustain. Ragaglini claimed that Hamas was amenable to the idea of a force of exclusively Turkish troops along the border, and that Turkey seemed interested, but that HAMAS would not agree to EU member state participation a la UNIFIL. One of the few tools that Italy believes may be helpful is reactivating and expanding the suspended EU mission at the Rafah border crossing. Ragaglini noted that there was already an existing

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agreement among the EU, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority for the mission. Reactivating the mission -- which was suspended in 2007 when Hamas took over Gaza -- with the active participation of the Palestinian Authorities would provide an international presence in the border area and not legitimize Hamas, which he agreed with us was a situation to be avoided at all costs.

Message to Lebanese: Stay Out of the Fray  
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15. (C) Frattini's objective in visiting Lebanon, according to Ragaglini, is to encourage all parties "to hold it together" and not get drawn into the conflict in Gaza. He noted that he saw no indication that Iran or Syria had an interest in stimulating Hezbollah involvement, and that thus far Hezbollah seemed to content to stay on the sidelines.

Syria: No EU Leverage, Eyes on Washington  
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16. (C) Ragaglini noted that Damascus had certain "psychological difficulties" in coming to terms with Lebanese sovereignty but he believed that a unified international community would incrementally make Syria adjust to the new reality. Pol M/C used the Syria discussion to make Ref B points on our desire to see the EU hold off on any further moves toward signing the pending Association Agreement with Damascus. In response, both Ragaglini and Formosa downplayed the significance of the agreement, noting that it was only initialed, could take months if not a year of technical work, and argued that in any case it could be suspended by any member state at any point for any reason. Despite pointed questioning, Ragaglini would not be pinned down as to the GOI position, but said he did not believe that halting the process now would represent meaningful pressure on Syria. He and Formosa added that Syrian officials had been clear repeatedly that "they could live without the agreement."

17. (C) Ragaglini went on to minimize the influence Rome (or

any other EU state, for that matter) had with Damascus at this point, given that the SARG was keenly and exclusively focused on what the new U.S. administration would do. This message had been rendered loudly and clearly to the GOI during all their recent interactions with Syrian officials. Responding to Pol M/C's comment that Syria had done nothing -- had not dispatched an ambassador to Beirut, had blocked IAEA access to its suspect nuclear site, had balked at beginning border demarcation with Lebanon, continued to provide aid and comfort to Hamas leadership -- to signal it was ready to deal in a new spirit (with Washington or anyone else), Ragaglini commented that "they are not the Swiss," the calculus is different. They will expect to strike deals and make compromises when they sit down at the same table with the U.S. but will offer nothing up in advance, not even as a signal. That said, Ragaglini assured us that Frattini would deliver "the right message" in Damascus on the un-kept commitments, and would urge the SARG to exercise influence on HAMAS leadership to come to a workable cease-fire deal with the Egyptians

18. (C) Comment: The Italians are palpably straining to find a useful role in bringing the Gaza conflict to an end. Israeli Ambassador to Rome Gideon Meir told the Ambassador in a farewell call this week that he had advised FM Livni to come to Rome at the first opportunity, to both acknowledge the strong rhetorical stance the GOI has taken in defense of Israeli actions, as well as to manage the lurching desire of the GOI "to do something." On the other hand, while the MFA would not say so, it is clear the GOI does not want to play hardball with Damascus on the Association Agreement, and believes it is well within the mainstream of the EU in taking this position.  
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